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On Sub-versive Signifiers:
U.S. Latina/o Writers Tropicalize English
Frances R. Aparicio

I dream of suitcases
full of illegal fruits
Interned between white
guayaberas that dissolved
Into snowflaked polyester.
—Víctor Hernández Cruz

As Víctor Hernández Cruz suggests in “Snaps of Immigration,”¹ the Spanish words of many Latino writers melt into the English of their otherness, like the white guayaberas that dissolve in the cold of snow and into the neutral homogeneity of polyester. It is significant that here Spanish is metaphorized as illegal tropical fruits—mangoes, guavas, and plantains come to mind—not allowed to enter the United States due to federal agricultural restrictions. These fruits—in the poet’s fancy—allegorically reveal, among other possible cultural icons, the absent presence of Spanish in the United States, a language analogously restricted, colonized, and ultimately erased by linguistic racism and English-Only Laws. While the image of “white guayaberas that dissolved / into snowflaked polyester” suggests cultural loss and assimilation, inevitably the position of the fruits, interned between the typical white Latin American shirts (“guayaberas”), allows for the possibility of contaminating or allegorically staining the purity of the white, English signifiers (the polyester).

These succinct verses by Víctor Hernández Cruz propose, in poetic language, what Juan Flores and George Yúdice have termed “transcre-

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ation”² and, borrowing one of Hernández Cruz’s titles, what can be deemed as “tropicalization,”³ a cultural and discursive counter-movement developed by Latino/a communities that dialogizes homogeneous Anglo constructs of the Latino/a as Other. As Rubén Blades, the Salsa musician, has expressed, he “doesn’t want ‘to be in America,’ but rather participate in the creation of a new America.”⁴ This tropicalizing gesture destabilizes discursive hegemonies that have been historically tied to U.S. relations with Latin America since the turn of the century and that continue to be deployed to objectify and silence the heterogeneous voices of an emergent cultural sector in the United States. Both transcreation and tropicalization propose multidirectional modes of engaging in the politics of representation by examining the shifting semantics of cultural signifiers, the flux of appropriations and re-appropriations that characterizes cultural identity and cross-cultural dynamics, and by allowing the voices and signifiers of Latinos and Latinas to reclaim our always already tropicalized “tropics” as a cultural site of our own. In the process, we are rewriting and transforming “American” culture with our own sub-versive signifiers.

The linguistic tropicalization which interests me here is located in Latino/a fiction and poetry written entirely or almost entirely in English. While the early interlingual poetry produced since the late 1960s and 1970s—Alurista, José Montoya, Miguel Algarín, Pedro Pietri—addressed a new “American” ideal readership who would recognize itself in the code-switching praxis of the working-class Latino communities, unfortunately—yet significantly so—many of these texts have remained outside the margins of the literary canon and virtually unread by both monolingual Anglophone and Hispanic audiences. In contrast, most recent works by U.S. Latino/as have emerged as English monolingual texts, and while this linguistic trend has been interpreted as a sign of the eventual assimilation of Latinos, or as an indication of this literature’s long overdue mainstreaming, I propose that their literary English is a different one, a language tropicalized from within. It constitutes, in its many variations, a transformation and rewriting of Anglo signifiers from the Latino cultural vantage point. As such, it becomes a textual *diferencia* from the linguistic repertoires of Anglo U.S. authors. Latino/a writers including Víctor Hernández Cruz, Sandra Cisneros, Helena María Viramontes, Pedro Pietri, Judith Ortiz Cofer and others, write in English because that has been the language of their education and intellectual formation, proof that the cultural conquest has had its consequences. Yet

a close reading of their lexicon and syntax reveals the underlying presence of Spanish in most of their works. As Helena María Viramontes has observed about her writing, the Spanish language and Latino cultural texts inform her work in English: "Sometimes my mistakes turn out to be my best writing. Sometimes I think in Spanish and translate. . . . I still say that if my works were translated into Spanish, they would somehow feel better. More, more, what's the word? At home."⁵ While some prescriptive linguists, editors, and authorities in education would judge the interference of Spanish in English as a deficit, a postmodern and transcreative approach would validate it as a positively creative innovation in literature. Indeed, the most important contributions of U.S. Latina/o writers to American literature lie not only in the multiple cultural and hybrid subjectivities that they textualize, but also in the new possibilities for metaphors, imagery, syntax, and rhythms that the Spanish subtexts provide literary English. Needless to say, this transformation is not restricted to the formal sphere, and its political and social implications regarding readership are only now beginning to be discussed. What on the surface appears to be a praxis that signals cultural assimilation may be defined also as a subversive act: that of writing the Self using the tools of the Master and, in the process, transforming those signifiers with the cultural meanings, values, and ideologies of the subordinate sector. Subversive also in a literal sense (*sub-verso*, under the verse, under the word), the Hispanic and Caribbean subtexts that permeate Latino fiction and poetry are only present for those readers who can recognize the underlying intertextuality clothed in the language of the Other.

Works published prior to the Chicano and Civil Rights Movement have been characterized by cultural ambivalence, an ambiguous discourse of cultural distancing, shame, or stereotyping. While many Latino authors wrote in English, when Spanish appeared it was usually translated into English, subsumed and explained through an apologetic perspective. The novel *Pocho* (1959) by José Antonio Villarreal illustrates this linguistic positioning.⁶ The language of Juan and Consuelo Rubio, parents of Richard Rubio, the protagonist, is partly constituted by linguistic *calques* from Spanish to English, that is, literal translations of Spanish idiomatic expressions. For example, "she has given light" and "I have an ache of head," among others, are English utterances based in Spanish phrases (*dar a luz*) and syntactic patterns (*dolor de cabeza*). As a device of linguistic verisimilitude, and of polyphony and heteroglossia, these strategies attempt to present to an Anglo reader the linguistic praxis of a first

generation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. In a literary decision of pragmatic compromising, Villarreal silences and hides the Spanish behind the English signifiers. Rather than creating a bilingual text that would reaffirm the cultural and linguistic realities of Juan and Consuelo, Villarreal opted for the needs of the dominant readership, using English to mask the Spanish of this first generation. Their Hispanicized, uneducated English is positioned as a negative paradigm from which the very literate, formal, and academic discourse of Richard and of the narrator establish a class- and socially-defined boundary. Anticipating Richard Rodríguez's conscious choice of linguistic loss and cultural separation from his family, Richard Rubio in *Pocho* draws a differentiation from his Spanish-speaking parents through his cannibalizing of English and his outstanding passion for reading, while Villarreal uses English to silence Spanish. In short, the novel articulates an internalized colonialism.

A second group of authors, whose poetics and literary discourse are shaped in the midst of the Chicano Movement, employ Spanish within English in an effort to contest the silencing of Spanish by previous Latino writers like Villarreal and by the American social and educational apparatus. True to the militant reaffirmation of Chicano identity politics, authors such as Saúl Sánchez, in *hay plescha lichans tu di flac*, Alurista in *Spik in Glyph?* and José Antonio Burciaga in *Weedee Peepe*, create an English texture that conforms to the Spanish phonetic system.⁷ In a revindictory and vengeful linguistic act, these titles are examples of English written and spoken according to the graphic and phonetic norms of Spanish, that is, according to the ways in which many Hispanics struggle to pronounce English. Since pronunciation is the linguistic element most vulnerable to discrimination and shame,⁸ this strategy inverts the negative values imposed by others on the Hispanic pronunciation of English. Socially unaccepted and ridiculed by many, this phonetic praxis is transformed into poetic discourse, obliging the reader to pronounce and read English under the phonetic and graphic paradigms of Spanish. In contrast to the underlying, silenced Spanish of *Pocho*, in these works Spanish functions subversively by inverting the center-margins axis between both languages, legitimizing the mispronunciation patterns of Hispanics and creating signifiers that are derived from linguistic "deviations."

The subversive presence of Spanish in English works has been further developed in Latina and Latino poetry and prose since the 1980s. Víctor Hernández Cruz's poetic works are constituted by many phrases, images, and metaphors in English that find their origin in linguistic *calques*, literal translations of colloquial phrases, proverbs and even song lyrics from

the Hispanic Caribbean. *Calques* have been traditionally defined as unconscious linguistic utterances that exemplify the power of a dominant language over another. Many linguistic studies of Spanish in the United States and of bilingualism have focused on the influence of English over Spanish, reaffirming the position of the former as the dominant language. In sociolinguistic studies, *calques* are associated with so-called uneducated speakers, and illustrate the subordination of Spanish to English, perpetuating at the same time the stereotype of the Hispanic who is losing his/her mother tongue.

Yet so-called *calques*, a term that connotes lack of originality in an uncreative, involuntary mimetic act, can also be construed as a very original literary strategy. As Jorge Luis Borges once commented on biblical translations, literal renderings can become a central vehicle for formulating new images and metaphors in a second language. The "Song of Songs," for instance, is a literal rendering of the Hebrew construction that respects the syntactic structure of the original, thus offering European readers a much more poetic utterance than "The Greatest Song."⁹

In Víctor Hernández Cruz's works literary *calques* invite bicultural and bilingual readers to recognize Hispanic sub-texts behind the English, under its surface structure. What in English reads as a funny, surrealist, or absurd metaphor, the inside reader perceives as a repetition with a difference: an idiomatic phrase, a proverb, or a cultural reference from the Caribbean which originates in Spanish but is articulated twice through English signifiers: "They put fire to the lata, Flame to the can"¹⁰ is a bilingual rendering of "darle fuego a la lata," a Spanish colloquialism that refers to persistence in various contexts. A haiku-like poem in *By Lingual Wholes* reads: "Put seeds into the Maraca / So That It Could Sound,"¹¹ a literal rendering of a well-known refrain from a Salsa song entitled "El ratón," initially performed by Rafael Cortijo y su Combo and later popularized by Cheo Feliciano. The refrain was deployed during the 1970s to refer to the quality of rhythm and music-making in Latino musicians, and was also recycled by the youth as a code to allude to marijuana smoking. When Víctor Hernández Cruz writes "The world could blow up *but you tranquil*"¹² he brings to the English language the slang of urban Puerto Rican youth, and when he refers to *Good Waters*¹³ he is actually speaking of his hometown, Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico. These selected utterances introduce new images and metaphors to English, while at the level of linguistic structure they propose new ways of manipulating lexicon and of inscribing the syntax and rhythms of Spanish within English.

If tropical subtexts may transform poetic discourse in English, they

also oblige the Hispanic bicultural reader to a rereading of the original cultural text. The decontextualizing of proverbs and idiomatic phrases (whose very own meanings survive precisely because of the frozen correlation between signifier and signified) and its defamiliarizing effects lead to laughter and humor, and at the very most to new expressive values created by their linguistic and cultural displacements. Rereading Caribbean proverbs in English implies returning them, transformed, to the literal value that they lose precisely because of their figurative and metaphoric value.

The bilingual and bicultural texture of many U.S. Latino and Latina works—in its subversive function—privileges the bilingual/bicultural ideal reader as it simultaneously achieves a balance negotiating between an Anglo monolingual audience and a Latino bilingual readership. However, a monolingual reading can only be a partial, limited one. When Roberto Fernández, the Cuban-American writer, translates literally into English classics of the Latin American canon such as José Martí's poetry or Sor Juana Inés's satiric poetry against men, or when he refers to the famous Cuban musical group El Trío Matamoros as "The Moorkiller Trio," or the allusion to the famous Cuban song "Son de la loma" as "They Are from the Hills,"¹⁴ the Anglo as well as the Latino monolingual reader is prevented from reveling in the pleasure created by these literal cross-writings, a pleasure that is not only parodic, but seriously and politically connected to reading one's culture in the context of geographic, cultural, and linguistic displacement and colonization. The partial involvement of the outside reader, however, does not dismiss the potential for new, creative meanings to emerge. Yet the politics of reading proposed by these works in/of tropicalized English are clear. By metaphorically displacing the ideal monolingual American reader and by producing texts whose poetic and cultural signifying require crosscultural competency, contemporary U.S. Latino and Latina writers are marginalizing and even potentially excluding the monolingual reader who has been glaringly positioned throughout history as the prototypical embodiment of cultural literacy. More important, they are concretizing the power of Latinos and Latinas to write as agents of our own border cultures rather than having to compromise by suppressing our bicultural referentiality. Like the illegal fruit that could stain the white polyester, like the typical *casitas* built in the empty lots of the Bronx, like Salsa music being played in clubs at large urban centers throughout the United States, Spanish signifiers are also tropicalizing literary English through their sub-versive presence.

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Notes

- 1 Víctor Hernández Cruz, *Red Beans* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1991), 13.
- 2 See Juan Flores and George Yúdice, "Living Borders/Buscando America: Languages of Latino Self-Formation," in *Social Text* 24 (fall 1990): 57–84. Reprinted in Juan Flores, *Divided Borders: Essays on Puerto Rican Identity* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1993), 199–224.
- 3 Víctor Hernández Cruz, *Tropicalization* (San Francisco: Reed, Cannon and Johnson Communications Co., 1976).
- 4 Flores and Yúdice, 216.
- 5 Helena María Viramontes, "‘Nopalitos’: The Making of Fiction," in *Breaking Boundaries: Latina Writings and Critical Readings*, ed. Asunción Horno-Delgado, Eliana Ortega, Nina M. Scott, and Nancy Saporta Sternbach (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1989), 33–38.
- 6 José Antonio Villarreal, *Pocho* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
- 7 Saúl Sánchez's *Hay plescha lichans tu di flac* (Berkeley: Editorial Justa Publications, 1977) textualizes the Hispanicized (mis)pronunciation of the English utterance "I pledge allegiance to the flag." Alurista's *Spik in Glyph?* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1981) begins with a series of thirteen poems numbered "juan, tu, tree . . .," also based on the stereotypical English with a heavy Hispanic accent. José Antonio Burciaga's *Weedee Peepo* (Edinburg, Tex.: Pan American University Press, 1988), like Sánchez's title, also parodies American patriotic discourse, "we, the people."
- 8 For a lucid analysis on the ways in which pronunciation becomes the site for linguistic racism and exclusion among Hispanic groups, see Ana Celia Zentella, "Linguistic Attitudes Among Hispanics in New York City," presentation at the Tenth Annual Conference on Spanish in the United States (Tucson, Arizona, October 1989).
- 9 Jorge Luis Borges, "Word-Music and Translation," Charles Eliot Norton Lectures, Harvard University, 1968.
- 10 Víctor Hernández Cruz, "Financial Report," in *Herejes y mitificadores: Muestra de poesía puertorriqueña en los EEUU*, ed. Efraín Barradas and Rafael Rodríguez (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Ediciones Huracán, 1980), 132.
- 11 Víctor Hernández Cruz, *By Lingual Wholes* (San Francisco: Momo's Press, 1982), n.p.
- 12 Víctor Hernández Cruz, *By Lingual Wholes*, n.p.
- 13 Víctor Hernández Cruz, *Red Beans*, 82.
- 14 Roberto Fernández, *Raining Backwards* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 1988), 49.